

Sam

PHILIP DE JERSEY

What do we know about Sam? The answer is remarkably little. But in this short article I'd like to consider what information we do have, and draw attention to a couple of useful stylistic parallels which do not seem to have been considered before.

Sam is known to us only through some 60 coins of three types. The most recent discovery is a bronze coinage, perhaps a half denomination since the average weight of the nine known examples is almost precisely 1.00g. I published this type in the *Numismatic Circular* for May 1997 (and see also David Holman, *Numismatic Circular* June 1998), following the discovery of a coin near Chatham which for the first time revealed clearly the inscription SAM on both sides (Fig. 1). The obverse bears a horse leaping right, its front legs extended horizontally forwards; a rein is just visible running from the horse's mouth. There is probably some sort of simple, star-shaped decorative motif above the horse's back, but it is not clearly revealed on any of the surviving coins.



Fig. 1. Bronze half-unit of Sam.

The reverse bears a griffin facing left, its head turned back over its shoulder and its tail raised over its back. There is a single small pellet in the space between the griffin's jaws and the tail. On both sides the inscription is at the bottom of the design, and there does not appear to be any space available for additional letters.

This half-unit is presumably accompanied by the rather better-known full unit, VA 187. The obverse of this type (Fig. 2) bears a boar facing left; there is a branch which arcs above it, and below, between the pairs of legs, is a small star within a ring. The reverse has a horse prancing left, its forelegs extended horizontally as on the half-unit.

Above is the same star-in-ring as on the obverse, with a simple ringed pellet to either side; below are the letters SA, the A with a dropped crossbar, and again with a ringed pellet on either side.



Fig. 2. Bronze unit of Sam.

Thirty-six examples are recorded in the CCI. Evans (*The coins of the ancient Britons*, 1864, p. 354) published the first serious account of the type, but was hampered in his identification by the poor condition of the two examples he owned. He did note, however, as well as their Kentish findspots, a similarity to the horse on the gold coins of Vosenos (VA 184, 185). This association has been repeated ever since, often with little thought given to the fact that the coins bear entirely different legends (eg Van Arsdell, *Celtic Coinage of Britain*, 1989, p. 108); even the normally circumspect British Museum catalogue lists VA 187 as "South-Eastern Bronze attributed to Vosenos" (p. 152).

The third type to be discussed here is the only precious metal coinage that we know of for Sam, a silver unit averaging approximately 0.92g for the 14 examples recorded. The obverse bears a head facing left, with stylized hair above a simple wreath (Fig. 3); behind the prominent ear are two ringed pellets, and behind and below these further rings. In front of the face – often off the flan – are the letters SA, with or without a dropped crossbar on the A. The reverse shows a griffin facing left, very similar to the creature on the bronze half-unit; its head is turned back, its tail raised, and there is a small pellet near its jaws. There is also a ringed pellet in the curve of the tail. Beneath it are once again the letters SA, with or without the modified A.



Fig. 3. Silver unit of Sam.

These then are our three types for Sam. It seems very reasonable to assume that they are the output of a single individual, and that SA = SAM; the stylistic similarities between all three coinages strongly support this. They are distributed widely throughout northern Kent, although there is some suggestion that the silver type is biased towards the west.

In my earlier article on Sam, I drew attention to parallels between the bronze half-unit and two rare types of Dubnovellaunos. There is a general assumption that Sam and Dubnovellaunos (and Vosenos) were contemporaneous: David Holman has written (*Archaeologia Cantiana* 120, 2000, p. 213) that "they can be dated to the very end of the first century BC, perhaps overlapping with the latter stages of Dubnovellaunos's reign." I'd like to point out several parallels here which might push Sam a little later.

Firstly, a very rare bronze traditionally attributed to Cunobelin: VA 1969 (Fig. 4). Look at the reverse. It's almost identical to the obverse of VA 187, the Sam bronze unit: the same boar, the same branch above, and even the little star reappears, though above the boar rather than ringed below it. The obverse is not a bad parallel for the SA silver unit, either: the same small eye, well forward on the similarly-shaped face, a prominent ear and simple hair. VA 1969 of course has a different obverse inscription, although it's difficult to say exactly what it is. It may be a blundered CVNO, or CAMV, or some combination of both (see Chris Rudd list 67, 2003, p. 22 for further discussion).



Fig. 4. Bronze unit of Cunobelin, VA 1969.

An even better obverse parallel may be provided by another rare Cunobelin bronze, VA 2087 (BMC 1920), which bears a head facing left on the obverse with CAM[...] in front of it, and an eagle on the reverse with [CV?]NO below. There are only nine examples of this coin in the CCI and none of them are in very good condition. But it's worth highlighting two of the best obverses here (Fig. 5): aren't these a decent match for the SA silver unit?

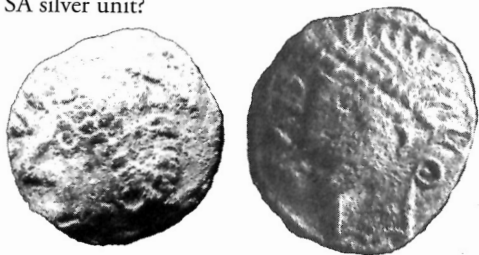


Fig. 5. Obverses of bronze units of Cunobelin, VA 2087.

If we accept these parallels to Cunobelin's bronze, then this has several important implications for the chronology of Sam – depending on the direction of influence. If the Sam silver unit and bronze half-unit were stylistically influenced by the coins of Cunobelin, then this presumably cannot have happened until after c. 10 AD, when Cunobelin came to power. If the influence operated in the other direction, the Sam coins may have been produced shortly before, or perhaps during the earliest years of Cunobelin's reign (the Cunobelin bronzes under discussion here seem likely to be among his earliest coins). And to throw another hat in the ring, where does Eppillus fit in? He too has a silver unit (Fig. 6) with more than a passing resemblance to the SA issue and VA 2087.

THINKING OF SELLING?

We'll fly anywhere in the world to buy a nice collection of Celtic coins and can offer cash on the spot in the currency of your choice.



Fig. 6. Obverses of silver units of Eppillus, VA 441.

At present it's impossible to resolve these problems. But we can suggest any number of possible scenarios in Kent in the first years of the first century AD: could Eppillus have succeeded Dubnovellaunos, in turn replaced by Sam? Or did Sam rule just part of the territory under Eppillus's

overall control? Could he have ruled in Kent during the early years of Cunobelin's reign, before Cunobelin's influence became stronger in Kent? And if so, what was his relationship to Cunobelin? (I won't invent another son, not just yet!). Where does Vosenos fit in to all this? There are no clear answers to any of these questions, but we may yet discover that Sam overlapped with the early years of Cunobelin, rather than with the later years of Dubnovellaunos, and that he may have had a closer relationship with Cunobelin than has previously been suspected.

Dr Philip de Jersey, author of Celtic Coinage in Britain manages the Celtic Coin Index at the Institute of Archaeology, Oxford.